

Phenomenological writing at an island beach: Encouraging connection with nature . . . and its limits

Pamela Courtenay-Hall, University of Prince Edward Island, Canada

Abstract

This article explores the value and limits of phenomenological writing aimed at helping students “connect with nature” in outdoor settings. It focuses on a fieldtrip to the beach whose purposes are many-layered: to help students in the social media age be fully present to the natural world around them; to help them recognize, articulate and develop their capacity to perceive the natural world and feel engaged with it; and to feel related to each other as sensate creatures. My ultimate goal is ontological: 1) to help students gather bodily experiences and reflections as fuel for questioning the modern notion of the self as acquisitive, separative, rational, self-interested, and embedded primarily in commercial and social media networks, and 2) to let experiences in nature inspire them to imagine alternative understandings of who and what we are. Students later engage with decolonial writings to put their experiences into fuller cultural context (e.g., Vine Deloria Jr.’s distinction between tourist, settler and Indigenous relations to land). This is where the most serious limits of phenomenological writing activities aimed at enhancing “connection to nature” appear; namely, the need at some point to understand experiences of “connection to nature” in the context of Indigenous/settler realities.

Résumé

Cet article s’intéresse aux avantages et aux limites de l’écriture phénoménologique en plein air pour aider les élèves à « se lier à la nature ». Il présente une excursion à la plage aux objectifs multiples : à l’ère des médias sociaux, cultiver chez les élèves une présence entière au monde naturel; reconnaître, articuler et développer leur capacité à percevoir le monde naturel et à en faire partie; se sentir lié·es les un·es aux autres en tant que créatures sensorielles. Mon but ultime est ontologique. D’une part, aider les élèves à réfléchir et à expérimenter le monde de manière incarnée, pour leur permettre de questionner la notion moderne du soi comme un être possédant, séparé du monde, rationnel, égoïste et principalement inscrit dans des réseaux commerciaux ou des réseaux sociaux numériques. De l’autre, laisser leurs expériences en nature inspirer d’autres manières de comprendre ce que nous sommes. Après l’excursion, les élèves replacent leurs expériences dans un contexte culturel plus vaste en étudiant des textes décoloniaux (ex. différence entre les relations au territoire touristiques, colones et autochtones, selon Vine Deloria fils). À cette étape apparaissent les limites les plus importantes de l’écriture phénoménologique visant à améliorer le « lien à la nature », c’est-à-dire la nécessité de comprendre les expériences de « lien à la nature » dans le cadre des réalités colones et autochtones.

Keywords: Connection to nature, conceptions of self, phenomenological writing, Indigenous/settler relations to land, ontological inquiry in EE

Introduction

Every September, I take my students on a fieldtrip to a beautiful and isolated island beach whose existence is unknown to most tourists – and to most Prince Edward Island residents. I don't tell the students ahead of time where we are going. I don't want them to come to the fieldtrip filled with preconceptions about "going to the beach," though of course the consent forms are suitably detailed. My aim is for the fieldtrip to be a revelation in phenomenological inquiry, especially for any students who have never knowingly done such inquiry – namely, inquiry focused on describing and interpreting their perceptions and immediate experiences, NOT on cataloguing objects. Second – and equally important among many other aims – I want the students to experience *together* that unique connection to nature, and the transformative *peacefulness*, that being at the ocean can engender for us, especially when our being at the ocean is an unexpected gift in the middle of a busy day.

And it *is* a busy time for students. I teach philosophy and environmental studies at the University of Prince Edward Island in Atlantic Canada. The students attending the field trip are in their first or second week of classes. Some are settling into university or into PEI or Canada for the first time. They are just learning new schedules, meeting new people, settling into new apartments, getting supplies, and juggling school demands with part-time work. The contrast is awe-inspiring: the busying whirl of the start of classes ... and the entrancing peacefulness of being at the beach. This contrast is part of what makes the activity so easily successful.

But most schools are not located 15 minutes away from an island beach. Are there possibilities for this activity and inquiry for classes with more limited geographical resources? The answer is – yes, though it may take a little more direction and preparation. I have led this activity on snow-covered campus grounds, with still valuable but admittedly *much* less impactful results.

The motivation for this beach activity is *to help students in the cellphone/social media age* to be present to the more-natural world around them, to experience and share with each other the peacefulness yet energy that being at a beach can bring, to experience in a collective setting a feeling of connection to nature, and to describe, interpret and later, share with other students their own experience of being at this beach and perceiving the patterns around them.

My ultimate aim, through these objectives, is ontological. In the course, I am trying to help students explore the fundamental nature of our selves and our world. I hope they can store up enough experiences in nature to provide fuel and stimulus for questioning our modern notion of the self as acquisitive, rational, self-interested, and intrinsically separate from each other and from nature ... and let nature inspire in them an alternative understanding of who and what we are, revealing itself as something fundamental they are related *to*. The activity occurs in the context of a 3rd year philosophy/environmental studies course where we explore also the ethical, epistemological, economic, political and ecological aspects of human-nature relationships.

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The first time I saw Kinlock Beach, I was overwhelmed by its subtle beauty – hidden from the road by “ocean-view” houses. I was surprised also by how at-home I felt in its waters. But it wasn’t home. I was a settler and new to Prince Edward Island. The beach is on the unceded land of the Mi’kmaq. Their ancestors probably swam and fished in these same waters before British settlements sold their land out from under them to “proprietors” in England.

So how does a settler *be* at this beach and swim in its waters while honouring it as Mi’kmaq land and reckoning with these tragic colonial realities? To help find answers to this question, I undertook several teaching initiatives at UPEI with Mi’kmaq colleagues and elders. Taking students on a fieldtrip to this beach was in part a way to share this enquiry. But the fieldtrip begins with the students exploring their relationships with nature at a more fundamental level.

In this article, I describe the phenomenological writing activity, student responses to it, and the philosophical and educational considerations behind it. In part 1, I query the concept of “nature,” and examine the role and limits of phenomenological and other educational activities aimed at helping students engage with nature, especially when that aim is understood as “connecting” to nature. Here, I address the criticism that “connection to nature” is an ineffective educational ideal, born out of colonial and economic privilege, attempting to impose a romantic vision of nature on students whose vision lies elsewhere, at best providing distraction rather than traction for critical engagement with the problems of climate change our students will have to face.

In part 2, I more fully describe the beach activity, outlining its objectives, design and implementation, including the guide questions that frame the writing assignment and initial student responses. In part 3, I share some student reflections and discuss student reactions to engaging with decolonial literature, including Vine Deloria Jr.’s (1999) distinction between aesthetic and spiritual experience where he distinguishes between tourist, settler, and Indigenous relations to land.

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As teacher-researcher, I am describing the method and the pedagogical and philosophical underpinnings of this beach activity, describing and interpreting its results, and trying to evaluate its pedagogical effectiveness and limits. This comes with the obvious *research limitation* of practitioner bias. Further, this project does not involve qualitative data analysis beyond the teacher observations and interpretations I offer. But the reflective outdoor activity I explore here is valuable for other teachers to consider, and I hope this exploration provides a good guide. Is the activity relevant to elementary or secondary school contexts? Yes, minus the more difficult readings and concepts. Many environmental educators use somewhat similar phenomenological writing activities suitably scaled for whatever level, even pre-school (see: Mortari, 2004 for a primary school example).

My goal in this research is also interventionist for EE in a broad sense. I aim to contribute to exploring the complexities of helping students “*connect to nature*.” This remains a vitally important goal. But it is one that requires more careful conceptualization than in the early days of EE when we lacked widespread recognition of the need or the ways to respond to the decolonial and multicultural complexities that intersect with this seemingly innocent educational aim. Understanding what it is to connect to nature also requires an engagement with ontological questions about what it is *to be* a human experiencing nature, what it is to be a part of nature encountering humans, and the relationship between the two ... along with related questions about the technologies we use to navigate our interactions with each other and with nature, from clothing to computers.

Part 1: The Decolonial and Multicultural Limits of Helping students “Connect to Nature”

First, the Conceptual Query: “Nature”? “Natural World”?

The terms “nature” and “the natural world” as used in this paper are not intended to restrict our vision of EE to sites or schools where students have the geographic or financial privilege to access marvellous landscapes. I use them to refer to places in our world where wild plants and animals have not been eradicated from the land by human development, and where the environment is not under constant human control. In other words, places where students can see biotic communities following their usual patterns free of direct constant human interference, even if their range or freedom has been limited by urban, rural, or industrial development ... and even if they owe their very existence in that place to development.

Thus, “nature” is intended to include not only beaches, forests, mountains and meadows but also a patch of lawn in front of a school or apartment building,

plants growing in a pot, crows flocking in treetops, a waste-strewn field near a factory where plants still find a way to grow, and so on. Whatever can inspire and sustain a child's or an adult's wonder at life and their witnessing of earth patterns is worthy of inclusion in the curriculum. Indeed, as Sean Blenkinsop and Estella Kuchta (2024) have noted, "the capacity for ecologizing education doesn't begin with a chunk of wild land. It begins with a radical shift in orientation, values, and understandings, and from that shifted perspective, education unfolds differently, regardless of the locale" (p. 7). But of course, the more humble the setting, the greater the teaching talent and student responsiveness needed to make the educational activity work.

Whose nature? Cultural, Bodily, Ideological and Conceptual Diversity

It is important to connect EE not only to the places where students live, but also to their social-economic-cultural background and bodily circumstances – for example, whether they are comfortable in outdoor settings or fearful; whether they are able-bodied or mobility- or endurance-limited, etc. In addition to all this diversity of individual experience, nature is also *conceptualized* in culturally and historically specific ways. It can be understood as sacred creation, object of reverence, Mother Earth; OR as a complex set of systems to be studied; OR as an illusion or site of temporary suffering; OR as a stockhouse of resources for human use; OR as a jungle of pests and scary creatures (e.g. Courtenay-Hall, 1995, Cronon, 1995, Russell, 1999). Thus, as Connie Russell (1991) has noted, when we talk about helping students engage with nature, we need to ask "Whose nature?" (p. 124).

It is important to respect this diversity and welcome it into the classroom even as we try to lead students to a fuller appreciation of nature in its many manifestations. Otherwise, we risk functioning as educational imperialists, imposing on our students our vision of nature and what it means to connect to it (Pivnick, 2003; McKenzie, 2004), perhaps reproducing in our educational practices "the very patterns of social domination" that we work to resist in other contexts (Russell, 1999, p.125).

A practice built into the debriefing for the beach activity is to bring the diversity of conceptualizations of "nature" explicitly into the curriculum, engaging students in respectful investigation of diverse and sometimes competing understandings and experiences of nature. This strategy is in keeping with the principle that environmental conflicts in the larger community are often best handled as sites for respectful inquiry in the EE classroom (Courtenay-Hall, 1997).

But that question, "Whose nature?" leads us to consider not only "Whose *conception* of nature?" but even more importantly, "Who has access to nature?" and "Whose *land* is it that we are encouraging students to connect to?"

"Whose Nature?" *Global Inequalities and Decolonial Concerns*

The "engage with nature" vision of EE that animates the beach activity – and a large part of the EE work done in Canada – operates with gifts of geographic and economic privilege that most people do not have. Many children in the world live in urban centres of high rise apartments and concrete, where they rarely if ever see grass or trees, and where plants, if any, are in pots. Many live in places where going outdoors can at times mean increasing their likelihood of developing respiratory or coronary diseases. The World Health Organization (2022) reports that 99 % of the global population live in regions whose air quality exceeds WHO limits. As well, 1 in 4 children around the world under the age of 5 live in poverty and without reliable access to food (UNICEF, 2024), and more than a billion school-age children live in habitats threatened by climate change (Institute for Development Impact, 2025). In these contexts, the urgency for EE is less about "connection to nature," and more about survival – learning how to grow food, or cope with pollution, or find shelter from heat, floods or cyclones (Mitchell, 2022; Tsepa, 2008).

Within all this global diversity, the most ethically charged dimension of the question "Whose nature?" lies in its bearing on the history of Indigenous peoples. "Whose nature?" there transforms into "Whose land?" ... and centuries of Western educational institutions ignoring this question come back to haunt any thinking educator.

Thus, environmental educators in Canada in the 21st century are faced with two aims which stand in complex relations of synergy and tension with each other:

1. The Ecological Aim: To help students experience, understand and respect a natural world that is a) dramatically receding from their view due to the intensification of urbanization and the ever-increasing attraction of social media and hand-held, always-available electronic entertainment, and b) dramatically changing in its hospitableness for human beings (and all animals and plants) due to the increasing impacts of climate change and environmental degradation, and
2. The Decolonial Aim: To help students understand the importance of connection to the land for Indigenous peoples – and to recognize that these connections have been unjustly interrupted, derailed, or suppressed ... by exile, by land appropriations and by attempted cultural genocide involved in the very "development" processes *that built* the students' homes, schools, and hand-held devices.

The synergy between these two aims is obvious, but there is also tension between them. The tension manifests in two mutually opposite reactions. One is the response of denial. The other is the response of white or settler guilt. Either of these responses can impede learning across the range of ecological

and decolonial educational aims, and so the educator must address both. There is a growing literature that can help.

Part 2: The Beach Activity: Educational Objectives, Design, Guide Questions, Implementation, and Initial Observations

Immediate Objectives and Long-term Aims

When I first developed the beach activity, I was teaching in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia. My objectives then were to help pre-service and in-service teachers experience the ways that directed phenomenological journal writing can inspire thoughts about their own relationship to nature ... so that they could, in turn, use this EE method in some form with students in *their* future classes.

When I left UBC to take up undergraduate teaching at UPEI, the context changed entirely. Here, I was faced not with teachers wanting to learn more about EE, but with undergraduate students most of whom had little time for engaging with nature in their day-to-day lives, and not much interest. The median was somewhere above having had a pet as a child, but somewhere below having an ongoing interest in hiking or in neighbourhood wildlife.

I had tried more modest methods and places to encourage engagement with nature, but with equally modest results. So I decided to launch the beach activity in my third-year environmental philosophy course in an effort to give the less engaged students a jump-start at having more active interest in the natural places around them. And it worked!

Kinlock Beach is on the south shore of PEI, on the Northumberland Strait. Despite its location in a residential area, it has an astonishing capacity to inspire contemplation, even when there are many people around. It is not the classic tourist brochure beach one sees on the north shore of the Island – and this is a good thing. It helps avoid stereotypical associations with being “at the beach.”

The beach has dark red sand and widespread plant growth, its shore laden with washed up eel grass and seaweed. It is surrounded by tall cliff embankments with upscale cottages scattered all around. Nevertheless, it is abundant with features that help carry the activity – the infinite extent of ocean, the heartbeat steadiness of waves rolling to the shore, the breath-giving fault-forgiving freshness of ocean air, the forever endless sky, the horizon beckoning across the impassable stretch of ocean, the living red-brown sand of the shore, the green reeds and sea grasses, the infinite grains of sand, the tidal pools teeming with life. All I had to do was get the students there with the right mixture of focus, educational structure, and non-expectation.

My immediate educational objectives with the beach activity are *to help students in the cellphone/social media age:*

1. Be present to the more-natural world around them
2. Experience and share the transformation of energy it can bring
3. Experience in a collective setting a feeling of connectedness to nature, and
4. Describe, interpret and share with other students their own experience of being at the beach and of perceiving the patterns around them.

Let's explore each in turn.

Objective 1) Being Present to the More-Natural World: Noticing Nature

Before the mid 20th century and the invention of television, technology *helped* people in their interactions with nature. It didn't *replace* nature. But today, technology includes the internet, video games, social media, instant foods, instant transport, and communication devices so elaborate that most people in urban areas can go through their whole day having no contact with uncontrolled nature beyond the air they breathe and the sky they glimpse. The devices we buy don't typically guide our interactions with *nature*. They guide our interactions with the *internet*. We are layers of mediation apart from nature. Human-nature (and human-human) separation takes on new meaning, manifested with every purchase from e-bay or Amazon.

So the task is *to set students up in a natural setting provocative enough, with questions simple enough and directive enough, and with classroom patterns of expectation strong enough, to open up their time and space habits to something different*. The phenomenological writing assignment is designed to do just that. It is a first step in discovering or returning to the long-ago childhood activity of noticing what is going on in the natural world right outside your door. The setting doesn't have to be a beautiful beach. Even schoolyards can inspire contemplation — from the magic of maple keys germinating in early spring to the wonderlands that snow creates in mid-winter.

The importance of developing nature perception habits is, in part, that you can love or respect only that which you can perceive, as Aldo Leopold (1966) noted. And you can understand who you are only if you understand where you have come from — which *ultimately* includes a part of the earth, however much our cultural messaging systems teach us otherwise.

The natural world we are part of hosts our existence as individuals, as communities, and as a species. Becoming familiar with some part of nature is a first step toward coming to understand what nature is . . . toward reckoning with nature as the source of our being (Jonas, 1984; Rolston, 1988; Plant, 1989), toward coming to understand its patterns (Jickling, 2015; Leopold, 1966; Rodman 1983), toward coming to understand our dependence on the forces of nature outside us and within us as “strands in a larger pattern” (Battiste and Henderson, 2005, pp. 77-78).

Objective 2) Peacefulness yet Energy, Focus yet Openness

Being at a beach (or in a forest, a park, a stream bank, an abandoned field, etc.) focused on phenomenological questions can help students experience the wonderful restoration that more-natural places can bring. Opening up to the non-human life forms, and the patterns and rhythms around them, can engender for students peacefulness, and at the same time, engagement with life. The inclusion *in the curriculum* of a focus on students' experiences in nature can signal to students that *yes*, observing nature closely *is* something that matters, something we *should* take the time to do in our lives. It is not “eccentric,” not simply a relic from decades past, long ago eclipsed by television and the internet – but rather, important enough to be included in university courses, and to be engaging.

Objective 3) Shared Connection to Nature

After the students emerge from their carpools and gather on the beach to hear instructions, it takes only a few minutes for them to find a place they want to sit. By the time they begin writing, most of them are profoundly engaged in observing what is around them. Their focus has astonished me, every class (ever since the year I began requiring cellphones to be left in their cars). Rare is the student who even seems interested to breach their solo engagement to talk to a buddy nearby. Most students appear to have, in this context, a transmuted sense of being with others – as if being in a community of people engaged in the same solo reflection task is itself a form of being together. This togetherness seemed to give them even more focus in their individual observation and writing task. But is this really a result of the beach activity context? Or is it just an extension of cellphone habits – being together but each busy with their own phone? I believe it was the beach activity context ... because I noticed it even in the early 2000s, before cellphone internet use was prevalent.

The largely solo experience of being at the beach becomes a shared experience when we meet in the classroom the next day. Hearing each others' stories of how they felt at the beach brings new perspectives to some students and corroboration to many others. The discussion adds to the communal and institutional validity of feeling “connected to nature” ... and of the flow of energy that being at the beach generated for them. That this concept of “connection to nature” needs critical exploration comes as a surprise to some students. On the other hand, in every class of 40 or so, there are a few students who do not engage, or who are skeptical of the entire activity. I make sure to make room for skeptical perspectives, and to respect their responses, both in our discussion, and in the guide questions I frame (see end of Part 2 below).

Objective 4) Describe and Interpret Their own Experiences of Being and Perceiving ...

Just as social media and video games can block young people from having time, impulse, or preparation to encounter nature (Courtenay-Hall, 2008), so a

limited science education and an overweening concern to reproduce in natural settings what they have learned from science textbooks can block students from experiencing nature on their own terms (Evernden, 1985; Payne, 2005), or from having the confidence to think that their own unaided observations are significant. So an important part of the beach assignment is its phenomenological focus: asking questions that foreground the student's perception of what is around them, and how they feel themselves responding to it. This focus on *their experience of the beach* frees students from feeling like inadequate knowers for their lack of scientific understanding and terminology ... despite their impulse to associate a fieldtrip to the beach with academic biology learning. A phenomenological focus thus engages students in trying to describe – not the sand or the wind itself, as through a list of measurable characteristics, and not the sand or the wind as understood in geology or meteorology – but the sand or wind as they perceive and experience them – and as they feel about them – *there*, at this moment, at this beach.

The Ultimate Aim: Ontological Reflection

The ultimate aim, through objectives 1 to 4, is ontological. I am trying to help students explore the fundamental nature of our selves and our world. In this course, we do many visits and community-service engagements in natural settings. My hope is that students can store up enough experiences in nature and in community settings (if they haven't in previous years) to provide fuel and stimulus for questioning our modern notion of the self as acquisitive, rational, self-interested, and intrinsically separate from each other and from nature, and embedded primarily in commercial and social media networks. We confront this individualistic, *homo-economicus* (and today, *homo digitalis*) representation of human-being-in-the-world first, by exploring the writings of such early pivotal thinkers as Descartes (1998 (1637)), Adam Smith (1993 (1776)), and Garret Hardin (1968). Against this representation, my hope is that students can let nature inspire in them an alternative understanding of who and what we are, and reveal itself as something *fundamental* they are deeply related to.

We begin by exploring the communal and land-based sense of identity communicated in Indigenous writings (Deloria, 1999; Little Bear, 2007; Battiste & Henderson, 2005). Our study includes examining the differences between tourist, settler and Indigenous relations to the land, which some students find challenging to their sense of themselves as ecologically attuned. Deloria (1999) distinguishes these three forms of relationship with nature not just by the time scales of inhabitation, but also by the degree of embeddedness of inhabitation in a community, in respect for ancestors, and in spiritual traditions ... and by the degree of embeddedness of community, culture and language in *the land* (also discussed in Battiste & Henderson, 2005; Korteweg & Root, 2016, p. 189; Little Bear, 2007). Toward this end, students participate in a sacred sweat-lodge ceremony led by Mi'kmaq Elders which brings this exploration into dramatic

bodily engagement, and invites students to come to learn more deeply about their own land communities and ancestors.

We next explore other alternatives to the idea that each of us is an independent self-interested organism bounded by the surface of our skins – and instead might be better understood as ...

- An interpenetration of organism and environment (Shepard, 1969)
- The organizing centre of the accumulation of habits we have formed in our interactions with our environments (Dewey, 1938)
- A relational being, in part constituted by our relations with others (Held, 1987; Keller, 1986) ... with particular people, animals, plants, places or things (Courtenay-Hall, 2003, 2025; Naess 1987; Plumwood, 2000)
- A centre in a field of care (Evernden, 1985); a node in an ever-growing ever-mending web of relationships (Courtenay-Hall 2025)
- A moment in an evolving set of processes (Whitehead, 1929)
- A bearer of witness, a being-in-the-world (Evernden, 1985; Heidegger, 1962)

We also explore the ways in which many of these core ideas were articulated in Indigenous knowledge systems long before Western thought had to try to find a way back to them (Deloria, 1999; Little Bear, 2007; Battiste & Henderson, 2005).

The Phenomenological Writing Assignment

Below are the written instructions that I give to students the morning of the fieldtrip, explaining why I withheld exactly where we were going until now. I distribute this form to the students in the parking lot before we leave ...

Phenomenological Writing Assignment Your name: _____

Phenomenological writing is writing about your perceptions and experiences simply and directly, without interpreting them through the framework of the theories you have learned in the natural or social sciences, or in history or philosophy. It also involves not letting your perception and experience be limited by the framework of the images and associations you have acquired from movies, music videos, social media, or reality tv shows. It involves trying to set aside all your scientific and other forms of cultural learning in order to *just BE* ... be *present* to everything around you ...

responding simply to how things feel to you ...
what you see,
what you smell,
what you feel on your skin,
what you hear,
what you taste in the air or on your lips ...

The point of phenomenological writing is to describe your experience as it evolves. Don't try to describe what you perceive in objective terms, as if you are a neutral observer. Instead, simply write what you feel and describe what you perceive *here and now*, in this moment. Try to leave behind all the categories and theoretical ideas you have learned. You are not writing a report for a lab experiment. You *are* the experiment ... and the researcher. Write about what you observe (all 5 senses) and what you feel in being at this beach.

Of course it is impossible to free our minds from every scientific or cultural framework we have learned. Even the very language we use to describe our perceptions is infused with cultural assumptions and indicators. But try as well as you can to experience this beach with your senses engaged, without first filtering everything you perceive through what you have learned elsewhere and in the past.

Keep this in mind as you respond to the questions below (... which themselves are already interfacing between you and your experiences ... but hey, I've got to give you some kind of prompt -- just in case your thoughts are fixed on something unrelated to being here at this beach ...)

So here are the questions ...

1. What do you see and sense, and how do you feel, when the ocean first comes into view over the crest of Kinlock Road? (Drivers are to ignore this question.)
2. What do you feel when you first walk out onto the beach? What do you perceive (see, hear, smell, taste, feel on your skin)?
3. What are you *feeling* being alone at the beach for the first 5-10 minutes? What are you perceiving (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling on your skin)?
4. The African-American poet and social theorist Audre Lorde writes that there is a source of energy lying deep within each of us:

"firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling ... a power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge," ... a source of energy that lies between "the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings" ... a source that, once we become acquainted (or reacquainted) with it, makes us *suddenly aware of our very deep "capacity for joy."* (1984, 87-89)

She writes that once we have experienced "the fullness of this depth of feeling" and once we have recognized its power, we will come to realize the importance of reorganizing our lives to be in touch with this source of energy, and to keep in touch with it (Lorde, 1984).

Does being at the beach evoke any feelings in you that resonate or link with the kind of energy that Lorde is describing?

(By the way, “No” is too short an answer. A negative reply is much better if you give it as thoughtful engagement rather than as a dismissal of thought. So if your experience here at the beach right now doesn’t include anything like the energy that Lorde is describing, then: 1) Describe what you are feeling that compares or contrasts with the energy Lorde discusses. OR ... 2) Explore whether there are other experiences you have had in your life that put you somewhere near the experience of primal energy that Lorde is describing. OR ... 3) Describe why her conceptualization seems out of alignment with your own experiences or at odds with your beliefs (if this is the case).

Part 3: “This Horizon Goes on Forever”: A Brief Look at Student Responses

There are typically 40 students in my 3rd-year Environmental Philosophy classes, from various disciplines, humanities as well as sciences. We travel to the beach by car pool. To bring the topic into their thoughts during the drive, I ask students (except the driver) to note what they see and sense when the ocean first comes into view.

The students report that from the moment they first see the beach, they are transported away from the hectic worries of their day-to-day life. By the time they walk out onto the sand, the change is visible. Their talking ceases. They seem immersed in peacefulness. Their faces are relaxed and turned outward to the ocean and the cliffs, *not* searching around for cues of what to do. Not even looking to see where their buddies are. They are absorbed in watching, listening and contemplating. Their movements, if they move at all, are slow and unself-conscious, as if the beach has freed them from the pressure of worrying about what to do or how they might look to others – which I would guess is not the usual “beach” experience for many students. Many express their response as “a feeling of freedom.”

When I ask them to find a place to sit and write, many students head off to a spot as if they already knew exactly where they wanted to go ... and within minutes, they become deeply engaged in being there – observing, contemplating and writing – as if there were no place they would rather be. (Of course, when the alternative is to be discussing and taking notes in a classroom on a sunny September afternoon, their ready engagement is not surprising.) The students do the writing assignment for 30-40 minutes.

Many students comment on the interesting contrast of being at the beach *with* 40 other students, yet having the feeling of being *alone* with nature. This is an important part of the way that nature can engage us. Describing the impact of cellphones on human social life, where people seated together at a dinner table can all be “alone” on their cellphones, Sherry Turkle (2011) has coined the term “alone together.” But being “alone together” is an intentional exercise of respect in educational nature settings like this beach activity. At the dinner table, it may instead be a sign, and vehicle, of the erosion of family and community life.

In response to question 3 asking students what they perceive and feel in their first 10 minutes at the beach, most give a detailed description of some subset of: the waves, the sand, the sky, the horizon, the sun, the wind, the ocean smells, fish, crabs, insects and birds, eel grass and seaweed, and how they feel in response to these things.

More than half speak of feeling “peacefulness.” Roughly 10 students in a class of 40 also report feeling a sense of “connection with the ocean,” or “oneness” with the ocean or with its creatures, or a sense of being “at one with the sky and the waves,” feeling “part of everything around me,” etc. I am careful not to use such terms in any of the previous class sessions. It is difficult to assess how much these assertions of “oneness” or “connection” or “harmony” are inspired by the beach experience (and other nature experiences students have had) vs. how much students are mimicking things seen or heard in popular culture. Very few students offer any explanation of what being “connected” or “at one with” means to them. This is a question we take on in later sections of the course, where we explore the various things that feeling “connected to nature” or “at one with nature” might mean, in three ways:

1. *Experientially*: What does it mean to the student using the term?
2. *Philosophically*: What basic beliefs about the structure of nature and the human self are involved in their (and other people’s) analysis? and,
3. *Scientifically*: What do psychology, biology and cognitive science tell us about the relationship between human beings and the (somewhere down there) natural world they live in?

In these later explorations, most students in previous decades were new to individualistic vs. relational vs. process conceptions of self. But in the past 10 years, a growing percentage of students, show familiarity with these concepts, particularly students majoring in psychology.

The activity is not all joyful attunement, of course. Several complain that the seaweed is “smelly” or “gross” and don’t want to step near it. These are of course understandable responses for students not accustomed to beach smells. I invite them to write about it and explore their feelings. In most of these cases, their writing reflects a not-surprising need for gentle introduction to ecological understanding and being outdoors. In any given class of 40 students, 3 to 5 students seem unengaged in writing or even in being there, and 2-3 students seem to be at a loss or passing time. I intervene to try to help them understand the very different nature of this beach assignment.

On the other side, it’s important to be watchful for the perennial problem of students trying to please the teacher – students guessing what the teacher wants the students to experience, and filling their inquiry sheets with it. As both Pivnick and Russell warn, it is important for EE not to degenerate into “enforced

compassion” – or here, “enforced connection”. It is also important for curriculum design not to be based on projecting a teacher’s own experience of nature *onto* her students. Some of the “one with nature” reports students give could well be of the “please the teacher” variety. But in most cases, the writing in their inquiry sheets, like their bodily comportment during the activity, indicates a genuineness and an engagement with the beach that seems inconsistent with pretense.

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Guide Question 4 departs from the open-question mode of phenomenological inquiry and asks students to engage with critical literature. It offers students some excerpts from the writing of black lesbian feminist theorist Audre Lorde, who writes that there is a source of energy lying deep within each of us, a source that “rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge,” lying between “the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” ... a source that, “once we have experienced it,” makes us suddenly aware of our very deep “capacity for joy” ... and leads us to recognize the importance of reorienting our lives to remain in touch with it (1984, 87-89).

The question asks: “Does being at the beach evoke any feelings in you that resonate or link with the kind of energy that Lorde is describing?”

I don’t expect all students to grasp what Lorde is saying. My expectation is merely that her words will beckon some number of students beyond the usual pleasures of being at the beach. And my *hope* is that in the presence of the ocean, the sun, the beach and the sky, Lorde’s descriptions might open or reopen for some of these students the possibility of feeling within themselves something like the energy that Lorde describes, help them experience the possibility that it is linked to their interactions with nature, and help them imagine the possibility of living their lives animated by this energy. I recognize that at this point in the exercise, I am going beyond the facilitation of phenomenological writing, instead entering the philosophy professor role of challenging students with readings that likely lead them beyond their present understanding – and risking projection. But my hope is that the experience will nudge some students not already there into what Vygotsky (1934) has called “the zone of proximal development” (p. 208).

There are usually around 5 cases (in a class of 40) of expressed non-resonance or disagreement with Lorde’s conceptualization of erotic energy. Most of them reflect difficulty understanding the excerpts I gave them from Lorde’s work, AND/OR discomfort with doing or sharing that depth of introspection in a university assignment ... which is understandable. I always advise students to share only what they wish to share, and to note any reservations they feel. Here is one particularly illuminating response, from a student I will call “Larry” (name withheld for anonymity):

Larry: No. The beach holds no special feelings for me. It is somewhere I would only go on family trips but I see all beaches as being pretty much the same. I feel no surge of energy While it is a beautiful day the persistent thought that this is work, keeps me thinking of how to do this the best. If we just came here or if I came by myself it would likely be different as there would be no sense of expectation, only my feelings towards this natural place. The idea that this is work seems to sap at my energy and reduces my joy at being somewhere so beautiful.

Larry's response is important, and impressively well articulated. It points out the potential problems of such an exercise – the artificiality of directing students to respond sensually *and report* on what they perceive and feel. The exercise was, in Larry's case, even counter-productive. He probably would have been happier and learned more in a regular classroom despite the beautiful day.

It is important to design our activities and read through all student responses with this filter – “pressure to perform” – in mind. At the same time, Larry is an international student under extreme pressure for grades and dealing with, as he later described it, situational depression settling into a new community. This personal context might also have been a factor in his response. I don't know if Larry rejected Lorde's reconceptualization of erotic energy – but it's clear he has rejected this well-intended assignment, and he has given very good reasons for doing so.

Larry's comments speak to the challenge of directing student attention to engage with the natural settings we bring them to. The artificiality and constraint of guide questions and forced writing in a natural setting can disengage students who are more or differently experienced in nature, and/or more free-thinking in their approach to inquiry – all things we should value and make room for as teachers.

Closing Comments

Are such nature engagement activities successful in the long term? After my students have left Kinlock Beach, does having completed the assignment help them be more present to the world? Find peacefulness and meaning in life? Connect with nature and with each other? Understand the importance of their life experiences above the claims of reductionist science? Feel more committed to environmental care and action? Even: understand the difference between phenomenological and analytic inquiry?

The assignment appears to be at least minimally successful in motivating students in the short term. In later classes or later courses, several students refer back to the beach activity as having re-energized their commitment to spending time outdoors and “connecting with nature” or working with environmental

groups. And it gives most students who haven't already experienced it some grasp of what it means to feel connected to – or at least deeply affected by – nature. It thus provides a good baseline for the later explorations we do of concepts of self and human-nature relationships.

But ... Does this lead to any long-term substantial change for the students' lives, or for the environment? As Connie Russell (1999) cautions, it is important not to assume that nature experience can “*automatically* contribute to environmental awareness, commitment and action” (p. 124). Long-term outcomes can only be assessed with long-term research. As Luigina Mortari notes (2004), we would do well to follow the advice of John Dewey (1938) in *Experience and Education*: in each of the educational programs we design, whether or not they succeed in advancing the realization of our aims, we should at least make sure that they constitute for students “an experience that is worth living in the present” (p. 121). On this criterion, such beach activities help us bat as close to 100 as a teacher can reasonably hope to get.

And hope is important. I have lived through two revolutions in human relations with nature. The first was the dawning of environmentalism in the 1970s. The second was the invention of the internet in the 1990s. This second revolution has every power to advance the first revolution (that is, to advance environmental understanding and activism). But it has also shown itself to have great power to distance and distract young people away from awareness of nature, particularly in the age of cellphones, social media and video games.

Getting 21st century students *out* into the natural world with objectives that engage them is the essential starting point for students to develop both their understanding of nature, and a bodily, emotional and spiritual connection to it. These are a foundation for future learning, for respectful, joyful living, for understanding the need for reconciliation, and for hope. When it doesn't happen in their home-life, it falls to us as teachers – and it is our great privilege – to help it happen in their schooling.

Further research is needed on *what works* in this endeavour, and what doesn't work, and why, for everyone involved: teachers, students, parents, school boards, community partners, and government agencies. Further research and effort is also needed on public outreach: on communicating the importance of education that helps students better understand and bring integrity to their relationship to nature and technology.

Notes

- ¹ I am grateful to past CJEE Editor Connie Russell for her support and encouragement on an earlier version of this paper. I am also grateful to the first set of reviewers, whose astute criticisms helped me articulate the philosophical foundations of a teaching practice that had become instinctive for me. I am grateful to the many students who engaged in this assignment

and shared their responses so openly and expressively. . . I am grateful to Connie Russell, Lisa Korteweg and Emily Root, for their challenging early work on the coverage (and lack thereof) of settler-Indigenous relations in EE. Their insights encouraged me to explain this beach activity in the full context of the teaching I do in these courses, rather than to address the settler-Indigenous dimensions of the beach assignment in a later essay. I am equally grateful to the reviewers of the current version of this paper for their insightful and encouraging comments.

- ² In the legal consent form, I tell students that we will be going to a site 15 minutes from the University in the town of Stratford. The fields may be wet with dew, and bodies of water are nearby, so students are told to wear boots or waterproof sandals, and bring a jacket in case it is windy. And bring water to drink. Cellphones are left in the transportation vehicles.
- ³ See, for example, Payne (2003), who argues that “to variable extents technology is a major “player” in the structuring of how humans experience the “lifeworld” and is a reason why the idea of “re-embodied” is preferable to the use of “embodied” in connoting the (constant) processes of “embodiment” practices. Ihde (1990, p. 3) suggests the term ecosystem should be replaced with “technosystem” because it more accurately describes the texturing “cocoon” in which most of us now live” (p. 179).
- ⁴ Discussed in, for example: Courtenay-Hall & Sutherland, 1998; Curthroys, 2007; Martin, 2020; MHCCA, 2025; Pivnick, 2007; Russell, 1999
- ⁵ Even the assumption that anyone can articulate an internally coherent conception of “the environment” or of “nature” has been challenged (Evernden, 1985; Morton, 2013).
- ⁶ See, for example, Battiste, 2013; Battiste & Henderson, 2005; Courtenay-Hall, 2018 & 2019; Giroux, 2017; Korteweg & Russell, 2012; Korteweg & Root, 2016; Nakagawa & Payne, 2011.
- ⁷ These aims apply to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, since not all Indigenous children are raised in ways connected to the land, nor in ways that engage with the history of colonization.
- ⁸ Here is the synergy: Understanding the importance of connection to the land in one’s own life helps non-Indigenous students begin to understand the importance of connection to the land for Indigenous peoples. Conversely, learning about the importance of land in Indigenous knowledge, spirituality and identity can inspire all students to cultivate a deeper connection to land themselves, even if, as Vine Deloria Jr. (1999) argues, non-Indigenous appreciation of the land rarely reaches the generational, sacred and community connection to the land that Indigenous peoples have.
- ⁹ See, for example: Courtenay-Hall, 2019; Davis et al., 2016; Giroux, 2017; Hiller, 2017; Korteweg & Root, 2016; Kulniecks, 2013; McDonald, 2016; Melro et al., 2024; Tuck et al., 2014.
- ¹⁰ Though of course there are video games and cellphone apps that can invite

and extend a student's engagement with nature, rather than prevent it (see: Korteweg, 2007; McLynn-Stewart, et al., 2020).

- ¹¹ See Cobb (1959) and Dewey (1899) for early explorations of the significance of childhood engagement with nature.
- ¹² Courtenay-Hall, 2003 & 2025; Orr, 1994; Shepard, 1982; Thomashow, 1996.
- ¹³ Though, of course, science education can also open students' eyes to wonders of structure and relationship they never imagined in untutored observation.
- ¹⁴ Courtenay-Hall (2008). "Video-gaming, Homo Digitalis, and the Internet as God in the 21st century" (presented at conferences 2001-2010; book ms in progress).
- ¹⁵ Pivnick, as quoted in Russell 1999, p. 126.

Author Note

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Pamela Courtenay-Hall, Philosophy Dept., University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, PEI, Canada, C1A 3P4. Email: pcourtenay@upei.ca

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